

Decoding the Paralysis of the De Facto Liberal International Order: Is Plurilateralism the Way Forward?

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Abstract

The phenomenon of progressive debilitation of Multilateralism and “Westlessness” has been associated with electoral validation of both positive assertive and insecure nationalisms globally, coupled with economic re-balancing, that has translated into political re-balancing, emboldening an Asia-centric epicentre of global politics, as the hegemonic articulation of the architects of rules-based Multilateral order favouring Western line of thinking had gradually resorted to Plurilateral approaches, ranging from the Doha Development Round of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) Quota Reforms. The paradigmatic shift from Western system of Grand Alliances to myriad Minilateral and Plurilateral issue-specific partnerships and constructs has been accentuated in an increasingly polarised, fragmented Post-Pandemic era, where the breakdown of global governance accompanied with economic protectionism, populist illiberal ultranationalist aspirations, vaccine nationalism and blocking of supply chains altered global leadership footprints and saw capabilities leveraged, commitments dissolved, exiguousness of resources, logistics disrupted, and economic downturn due to material disruptions. As floundering multilateralism and its gridlock can be attributed to anathema in materialising broad-based consensus among WTO members while reducing domestic policy space, the proliferation of Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) indicate the desire of deepening trade integration among member-states, positioning trade progress at the plurilateral realm. The historic weaknesses in the reform of Bretton Woods Institutions, the rigidity and ineffectiveness of United Nations’ bodies, structural and functional shortcomings of the World Health Organisation got more pronounced as the COVID-19 Pandemic magnified the Multilateral system’s fault lines. The paper highlights the evolution and critically evaluates Multilateralism in International Relations. It anatomises the multiple facets of Plurilateralism and attempts to demonstrate how Plurilateralism provides the roadmap for future global governance.

Keywords: *Multilateralism; Plurilateralism; Global Governance; World Trade Organisation; COVID-19.*

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Introduction:

The architecture of the international system is predicated on Multilateralism, and in essence, it denotes a special cooperative arrangement between at least three or more nation-states who are held together by a common set of norms and values. The comprehensive debilitation of Multilateralism and the augmenting importance of Plurilateral arrangements in the international system can be attributed to tectonic shifts in the last twenty to thirty years, signalling a quantum jump from the Bipolar Cold War-era international order to an increasingly fragmented Multipolar world order with myriad epicentres of power. In the 56th Munich Security Conference, 2020, India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar had prognosticated the weakening of Multilateralism by correlating it with the phenomenon of "Westlessness", as an immediate repercussion of massive economic re-balancing, which had translated into political re-balancing in the international arena.¹ The West failed to cultivate broader constituencies of support in the Global South, characterised by a dichotomy of interests and beliefs with regard to Multilateralism, and subsequently, institutions like the United Nations (UN) appeared far less credible with new set of global hurdles, ranging from technological challenges to challenges of connectivity, that are not readily amenable to Multilateral solutions.²

The lassitude surrounding Multilateralism, especially the functional paralysis of three vital responsibilities of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), namely, transparency, negotiation and dispute settlement, coupled with the massively dented credibility of the World Health Organisation (WHO) (as a recent ontological indicator, which transcends beyond the personality factor and so-called perceived Chinese bias of WHO's present Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus), clearly demonstrate the accentuation of deep-rooted systemic maladies and the³ inability of the de facto rules-based Liberal International Order and its Multilateral architecture in tackling its misuse by systemic rivals like China, typified by its hegemonic assertiveness and unilateralist revisionism.

As the COVID-19 Pandemic exacerbated pre-existing geopolitical fault lines, altered global leadership footprints and power equations, the struggling stature of Multilateralism failed to effectively rise to the occasion, as there has been very little visible leadership in terms of

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defending the agenda and setting directions. Since the quality of Multilateralism relies on the extent of consensus among major powers, which has been short in supply, the bodies and agendas turned out to be manifestations of trial of strength instead of a common landing zone.⁴ As global deliberations and speculations focused more on influencing institutions, striking a harmonious balance between national interest and global good became tough, resulting in Plurilateralism becoming more acceptable than Multilateralism; eventually the pursuit of resilient supply chains, particularly in the health realm and vaccine collaboration, has been added to its burgeoning agenda.⁵

The transformative world order is likely to witness more regionalisation, de-globalisation, de-coupling, self-reliance, segmented globalisation and shorter supply chains, with increased awareness surrounding strategic autonomy in the economic realm.⁶ The ostensible weaknesses of West-led Multilateralism accompanying the protean nature of international politics ought to be supported with dynamic Plurilateral arrangements; the Western nation-states are making new compacts, looking for new convergences in the security and geopolitical domain.⁷ They are prioritising global burden-sharing specifically with this geography as a practical concept, in issues like maritime security, climate change and counter-terrorism, while psychologically getting out of the inertia of alliance mindset.

Set against this background, the paper aims to anatomise and highlight the shortcomings of archaic and static Multilateralism sans innovation vis-a-vis the rise of Plurilateralism as a global phenomenon with more issue-based partnerships gaining prominence. I would like to argue that a resuscitated, reformed multilateral system with Plurilateralism as an intermediate step can prevent the breakdown of global governance and splintering of global architectonic system into myriad Minilateral groupings and constructs. The incorporation of pluralism into the Multilateral system can create a robust global governance architecture that can mitigate not only traditional inter-state conflicts but a vast array of non-traditional security challenges like epidemics, pandemics, climate change, cross-border terrorism.

Multilateralism: Meaning and Implications for Global Governance and Trade

In International Relations, Multilateralism entails an arrangement where nation-states cooperate with each other in order to promote common objectives, balance and regulate competing interests. Such cooperation relies on certain principles and values shared by all parties, which include: Respect for sovereignty; respect for commitments; equity; consent; consensus; and a teleological commitment that Multilateralism is essential for international collaboration.⁸ With the failure of League of Nations and the birth of the United Nations (UN) in the post-Second World War international system in 1945,⁹ the promise of Multilateralism subsequently ensured more sustainable deals, collective bargaining power, creation of norms that went beyond the immediate agreement.¹⁰ It turned the legal into the moral and committed itself to a rules-based international order characterised by an overall sense of predictability with a focus on domestic priorities and prosperity for all sovereign nation-states. However, ever since the crystallisation of Multilateralism helmed by the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions, there has been an overarching dominance of the liberal hegemonic narrative in the international system, bereft of other normative values as illustrated in the absence of Germany, China, and Japan as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Robert Keohane defined Multilateralism in his seminal article as the practice which involves the act of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, *vis-à-vis* ad hoc arrangements or through means of institutions. In this context, John Gerard Ruggie opines that, the qualitative dimension of Multilateralism makes it truly unique and according to him, it essentially involves three specific features, namely (i) generalised organising principles; (ii) indivisibility; (iii) diffuse reciprocity.¹¹ Ruggie contrasts these elements with those associated with Bilateralism. Ruggie maintains that, 'Generalised Organising Principles' typify those vital principles which specify appropriate conduct or behaviour for a class of actions, without consideration of the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may or may not exist in any specific occurrence, and this may even be applicable to the bigger powers which 'otherwise may prefer to follow their own interests, at the expense of explicit institutional rules.'¹²

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Ruggie held that, ‘Indivisibility’ involves the due recognition of and formal acceptance by the participants and myriad actors in Multilateralism, that those public goods exist, even if they are in essence, socially constructed. ‘Diffuse Reciprocity’, lastly, suggests that the multilateral arrangement can be expected to yield a rough equivalence of the benefits in the aggregate and over time. Multilateralism can be distinguished from other forms of inter-state relations like Bilateralism or Minilateralism based on sheer numbers and owing to the presence of agreed-upon rules and principles, which contributes to some degree of reduction in policy autonomy of the participating state actors.¹³

In the context of international trade and Geo-economics, Multilateralism entails that all the bona fide WTO members jointly formulate, deliberate and agree on common rules and regulations,¹⁴ while negotiating on trade liberalisation commitments. Then the members should apply these norms, while offering market access in adherence to their national schedules to all the other WTO members, in a completely non-discriminatory manner.¹⁵ Jagdish Bhagwati held that, Multilateralism perennially served as the ideal of global trade governance for purely political and economic considerations, preventing trade from intensifying geopolitical and geostrategic tensions.¹⁶ Multilateralism provides the guarantee that international trade would take place within an ecosystem of coherent, transparent set of rules and norms, which ensures a level playing field for all consumers and traders. In this regard, Multilateral trade liberalisation effectively ensures the optimal allocation of resources, thereby maximising output, productivity, economic gains and ultimately socio-economic welfare and outlawing discriminatory trade liberalisation that distorts global trade flows and misallocates world’s scarce resources, endangering welfarism. Although on a substantive level, Multilateralism’s architectonic system vindicates the notion of Sustainable Development, environmental concerns are often reduced to tokenism as there have been policy divergences culminating in the chronic absence of a coherent framework to address the menace of resource nationalism prevalent in the nations of Latin America, Africa, and in Russia.¹⁷

Dilapidating Multilateralism: Weaknesses, Loopholes and a Bleak Future in International Relations

The post Second World War Liberal International rules-based order and the multilateral system constituting its edifice have been subjected to increased pressures from both Western and non-Western nations, necessitating the importance of constructive, reformed and restructured Multilateralism as the prophylactic against global challenges. Historically, the system of post-World War- II agreements to address and resolve global problems has become plagued with multiple obstacles and challenges. Brigitte Dekker et.al have observed that, structurally, the organisations and treaties have always favoured the aspirations and interests of the Western, economically advanced nation-states, whose procedures, norms, standards and ideas underpin these Multilateral formations.¹⁸

The demise of a bipolar world order during the Cold War period contributed to the ‘unipolar moment’ in international politics with overwhelming American preponderance of power. It was soon followed by a multipolar power configuration as power became increasingly diffused in the international system, and consequently, the crises surrounding Multilateralism became better pronounced. The inefficacy of Multilateralism was on account of a plethora of geopolitical tensions, rapid technological changes, the resurgence of nationalism and illiberalism, and the retreat of globalization. There were also the temptation of bilateral deals, the pull of populism, and collective compromises diluting international deals. The limitations associated with “One-size-fits-all” and its sub-optimal outcomes, and procedural reasons on account of slow, tedious and unpredictable coalitions also contributed to its inefficacy.¹⁹

Ever since the inception of WTO, its immediate predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) contributed to major Multilateral difficulties in the present scenario, and as the WTO became operational from 1995, the GATT managed to complete negative economic integration, which required little or no positive integration, viz. rule convergence on national regulatory standards. The GATT essentially prepared the building-blocks of the present architectonic system, that involves non-discrimination rules, a common dispute resolution forum and most importantly, the provision of reciprocity between member-

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nations regarding tariff concessions.²⁰ With the genesis of WTO, it has been assuming a greater role in demanding larger regulatory convergence between nation-states on a plethora of issues like non-tariff measures, standards of service, intellectual property rights, subsidies and concessions, myriad technical and legal standards, even though it was devoid of provisions regarding E-commerce or digital trade, and was crippled with incomplete General Agreement on Trade in Services. This signifies that the WTO was outmoded and backdated on arrival.²¹

Essentially, the necessity for greater rule convergence to achieve further advancement and progress has vital repercussions for national regulatory sovereignty. It simultaneously demands national capacity for implementation and oversight, viz. an area where developing nation-states often struggle to meet the pre-requisite conditions. As the WTO aimed to achieve such a degree of convergence with increased member heterogeneity as compared to its precursor GATT, the divergences in socio-economic indicators, development status, political systems, cultural value systems and social preferences have contributed to practical difficulties in agreement on any WTO issue.²² The predicament arises as it is imperative for the WTO agenda to be preceded by an overarching consensus, which is realistically impossible.²³ Unfortunately, even between developmentally, economically and culturally analogous nation-states vital differences in social preferences lead to significant obstacles in securing a legitimate trade agreement, especially when behind-the-border regulatory issues are at stake in the process.

The Doha Development Round, viz. the trade negotiation round of the WTO aiming at lowering trade barriers and enabling increased global trade, which commenced in November 2001, subsequently resulted in stalemate and persistent deadlock, highlighting the inefficiency in WTO's legislative track.²⁴ It demonstrated the diminished expectations and ambitions of various WTO members and the recurrent failure to reach consensus owing to domestic political and economic factors among the WTO members rather than procedural designs. The process consequently intensified to the hilt, resulting in the Doha Round's de facto collapse in December 2015, following almost fifteen years of redundant cumbersome negotiations.

With less than 30 years of its establishment and functioning, the WTO

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has thus been plagued with the challenge of remaining relevant, transparent and credible for 21st century global economic governance. The WTO's collective failure in overseeing any form of Multilateral liberalisation or creating new rules for ensuring the governance of a dynamic global trading system has raised doubts and tensions regarding the overall efficiency and performance of its legislative function. Notwithstanding deliberations in academic and policy circles regarding new approaches and pathways for governing global trade amidst the Doha deadlock, multiple critics argue that the WTO's set-piece negotiations, particularly consensus-based bargaining underpinned by the 'Single Undertaking' had resulted in an increasingly politicised and inefficient process.²⁵

The global trust erosion and loss of confidence associated with Multilateral trade negotiations and governance among policymakers and different state actors amplified doubts concerning the outcome of WTO deliberations in producing new trade commitments while addressing the dynamic, evolving realities of the global economy. Multilateral trade negotiations and governance are broadly perceived as ineffective and inefficient in the international community. Floundering Multilateralism with instances of failure of the Doha Development Round and the inability to curb fishing subsidies, in spite of the decimation of global fish stocks has clearly diverted trade progress at the Plurilateral level. Owing to the lack of any procedural panacea that might readily resolve substantive differences over core issue areas ranging from agriculture to services, concerning the Doha Development Round the ineffectiveness of Multilateralism with its consensus-building element has become more apparent.²⁶

Additionally, historically the procedures, rules or "standards of the game"²⁷ surrounding this system have assumed a bias or preference for Liberal Democracy, free market and Capitalism. Such homogenised standards are obsolescent today in the face of China's pyrrhic rise as a global hegemon, as reflected in China's ability to promote a new alternative narrative and parallel ecosystem for Multilateral treaties and organisations (e.g. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative project, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the success of Beijing Consensus triumphing over Washington Consensus). It exposes the structural shortcomings of the present Multilateral system. Although China's subversion of the status quo of the de facto Liberal International

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Order vis-à-vis parallel institution-building efforts has short-term weaknesses in the form of “Debt-trap Diplomacy” or environmental challenges as demonstrated in nations like Sri Lanka or the Philippines, the Chinese triumphalism has been at the expense of a dilapidating West-led archaic Multilateral order.²⁸

The unilateral retreat and withdrawal of USA as the Global Policeman state under Donald Trump’s presidency (as exhibited in its rejection of Multilateral rules-based system in addressing the challenges posed by Russia and China and taking an Autarkic turn in promoting economic protectionism) clearly caused massive damage to Multilateralism; it ruined trans-Atlantic partnerships and dissolved leadership commitments in the face of great powers’ contestation for regional hegemony. The obstruction and delay of most of the WTO’s major functions and the sluggish pace of discussions and deliberations to remedy them demonstrate the risk of the organisation’s quietus as the chief arbiter and regulator of global trade and global economic governance.²⁹

Because of the US-China trade tussle, intensifying geopolitical confrontation and diplomatic contestation the underlying issues with the WTO have quantified by biblical proportions in the face of recent threats of US withdrawal. Thus the structural shortcomings and the inability of Multilateralism to effectively deal with current trade disputes have come to be exposed. The retreat of USA from the very international order that it helped to construct marks a watershed moment in international politics. China and Russia, increasingly assertive, belligerent, confident and powerful, particularly in the military domain creep into this space and attempt to strengthen their great power credentials.³⁰

The US withdrawal from agreements and institutions that epitomised global trade, arms control and human rights standards for several decades constitute a tectonic shift in International Relations. There have been major transformations in the direction, scale and composition of cumulative trade flows, with important shifts in the increasing complexity and changing capabilities of twenty-first century weapon arsenals. There is also a discernible backsliding of the International Human Rights Agenda. All these call for new alternative solutions to re-build or re-calibrate institutional arrangements that are capable of cogently governing these

issues on a Multilateral level.³¹

Burgeoning Plurilateralism in International Relations and Global Trade: Anatomising its Meaning, Development and Significance

Plurilateralism translates into trade and investment negotiations between three or more nation-states, lesser than all WTO member-states, and is not a completely revolutionary or novel phenomenon in world politics. The Multilateral trading system (as nation-states have always come together in small groups in order to formulate, influence or negotiate, in or outside the Multilateral frameworks) typically entails a special approach for nation-states who are willing to move forward with the trade liberalisation process. Conversely, Plurilateralism represents a reaction to the miscarriage of floundering Multilateralism.³² Like Multilateralism, Regionalism, Bilateralism, a fourth alternative can be Plurilateralism in global trade and governance issues: an assemblage of like-minded countries, where it implies an arrangement or system comprising smaller groups of governments that collectively pursue mutually agreed goals, values, procedures, and accept certain obligations in the pursuit of their collectively shared goals.³³ These groups need not necessarily be geographically defined, as such strictly geographic connotation suggests a very closed and limited definition of regionalism which is undesirable as against such Plurilateralism that can advance a common economic agenda more efficiently and rapidly.

Barry Eichengreen et al have analysed the process of 'Plurilateralisation' of international financial governance, defining it as the gradual proliferation or mushrooming of regional, bilateral and global governance arrangements, that have shaped and hugely influenced international monetary and financial relations and geo-political, geo-economic equations in the international arena over time.³⁴ Such added layers of governance can be attributed to key factors like, the demand arising for an international lender of last resort and the necessity to administer and tackle cross-border monetary and financial policy spillovers. The desire and aspiration surrounding policy ownership in a globalised world and the convergence of bilateral liquidity provision policies with the strategic foreign economic policy designs and goals of different countries are additional reasons.

As a special amalgamation of bilateral, regional and global arrangements, structurally these novel arrangements resemble the

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International Monetary Fund (IMF). The global financial architecture has exhibited episodic tendencies of becoming increasingly diffused and multilayered vis-à-vis Plurilateralism. This is particularly true in view of the demands for crisis management and containment mechanism in global financial governance on account of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98 and the 2008 Global Economic Meltdown following the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy.³⁵

The WTO regime had been preceded by remarkable developments, and in this regard, the Tokyo Round of multi-year multilateral trade negotiations (1973-1979) had managed to produce nine agreements that covered chiefly non-tariff measures, to which the GATT parties could subscribe purely on a voluntary non-binding a la carte manner.³⁶ It is necessary to note that, within the framework of the WTO, there are formally two Plurilateral arrangements, viz. the Agreement on Trade in Civil Aircraft and the Agreement on Government Procurement (GPA), and additionally Plurilateral approaches within the ambit of WTO include "Tokyo codes" and Information Technology Agreement (ITA).³⁷ Plurilateral approaches outside the jurisdiction of WTO involve Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs), and in the 1990s, a special section of renowned exporters of telecommunications, information technology (IT), financial and economic services had managed to negotiate their own respective agreements, thereby opening up new commercial opportunities, which were not formally included within the WTO's fold.³⁸ Further, the Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) fall strictly under Plurilateral approaches and are conditional on the specific requirements of GATT Article XXIV or the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) Article V, which constitute the centre of gravity.³⁹

The horizontal proliferation of Plurilateral approaches and groupings in the international arena with time suggest few important advantages and attractions associated with it, as both theoretically and practically, such arrangements ought to advance an increasingly progressive, dynamic and responsive WTO agenda, thereby subsequently diminishing the diversion or splintering of global trade liberalisation initiatives to RTAs significantly. Plurilateralism also contributes towards more effective and efficient differentiation in the levels of rights and obligations among a community of increasingly diverse state actors, and successfully manages

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to provide a robust mechanism for promoting higher efficiency at much lower cost in the negotiations of WTO.⁴⁰ Additionally, there are certain economic gains associated with Plurilateralism as it offers a variety of costs and benefits. In this regard, a principal advantage of Plurilateral Agreements (PAs) and Critical Mass Agreements (CMAs) imply an economic benefit, and such PAs and CMAs propel economic growth through two specific channels – PAs and CMAs provide for tariff reductions and thereby liberalise financial or economic relations between nation-states, enabling them to tap on their specific comparative resources and benefits.⁴¹ All in all, Plurilateralism accounts for an exceedingly efficient allocation and proper usage of nation-states' production capacities and resources.

Further, by efficiently streamlining governance and modernising trade rules and regulations, the PAs and CMAs serve as promising governance tools to re-calibrate and update norms, apart from the classic economic gains associated with trade integration, and thus Plurilateralism has become a propitious strategy in elaborating new modern rules and regulations for salient trade issues in International Relations.⁴² Finally, Plurilateralism, manifested through PAs and CMAs, is firmly grounded in WTO's architectonic system, as it is rooted in its legal, institutional, normative and political setting, thereby having the potential to keep the WTO rejuvenated and reinvigorated as the political and legal hub of the international trade regime.⁴³

Serving as a promising alternative to dilapidating Multilateralism, policymakers and state actors worldwide have become more inclined towards Plurilateral trade governance, and in this regard, the 11th Ministerial Conference (MC11) in Argentina, in December 2017 managed to produce three special declarations by sub-set WTO members, which have been perceived to prepare the foreground for new Plurilateral initiatives on new rules and regulations for trade involving Micro, Small and Medium sized Enterprises (MSMEs), investment facilitation and e-commerce affairs.⁴⁴

It is noteworthy that the ascendancy of Plurilateralism translates into the conversion of the WTO into a so-called 'club of clubs' involving differentiated trade integration.⁴⁵ PAs and CMAs facilitate like-minded nation-states to strengthen, deepen and broaden WTO norms and commitments concerning specific trade issues. The sceptic WTO member-

states may not necessarily participate in these initiatives for ensuring the PAs and CMAs to materialise. Thus Plurilateralism has emerged as a more efficient, flexible and dynamic arrangement than Multilateralism in adjusting the WTO to the evolving challenges associated with global trade, requiring all 164 WTO member-states to participate and concur with the new rules, regulations and commitments.⁴⁶

Navigating the Way Forward: Tracing the Future of Global Governance and Trade

Notwithstanding the growing popularity and global preference for Plurilateral groupings and formations to resolve and mitigate both traditional and non-traditional security challenges, trade issues and other aspects pertaining to the global economic governance architecture, there is a paradox associated with it, as Plurilateralism supports the international free trade regime but disrupts larger Multilateral processes involving cooperation on myriad issue areas. Thus it demonstrates the possibility of transgressing the Multilateral values of inclusiveness, transparency and universality.⁴⁷ Similarly, critics of Plurilateralism dismiss the approach because it causes political and legal fragmentation within the existing architectonic system and thus hampers economic integration and capacity-building process.⁴⁸ It limits interest in genuine Multilateral efforts, creates tremendous confusion in the trading system by multiplying and owing to conflicting rules of origin that increases uncertainty in the system and produces compliance problems for companies side-lining developing nations of the Global South.

However, as the COVID-19 Pandemic has necessitated the urgency of Multilateralism-driven global cooperation on a vast array of subjects like climate change and vaccine collaboration, the Pandemic has accentuated pre-existing structural and functional loopholes that were associated with the unreformed, static and malady-driven Multilateral order. Specifically, one notices the policy paralysis, leadership crisis, lack of bandwidth in the decision-making apparatus and ineffective prophylactic measures vis-à-vis the WHO and WTO. The rise of a new set of challenges ranging from a heightened sense of vulnerability and insecurity to acute trust, legitimacy and accountability deficit may be mentioned. Added issues related to Multilateralism are travel restrictions, health security, economic protectionism, vaccine nationalism and the chronic absence of global vaccine diplomacy.⁴⁹

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William Alan Reinsch maintains that Plurilateral arrangements are net-trade creating and such negotiations present a lucrative opportunity for producing gold-standard agreements that proceed successfully farther in the direction of open, free, resilient, rules-based trade;⁵⁰ floundering Multilateral agreements on the other hand involve more compromises, and a relevant example in this context has to be the digital trade language in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and the U.S.-Japan agreement. Amrita Narlikar advocated two vital narratives, namely, revival, reinforcement and resuscitation, and fundamental restructuring of the existing Multilateral order, thereby acknowledging the gravity of global problems and the importance of collective action in resolving them.⁵¹ Naoise McDonagh holds that the multiplication of PTAs is a logical outcome of the convolutions and practical difficulties in achieving consensus among WTO members on subjects that diminish domestic policy space.⁵² He argues that its proliferation reflects the desire of nation-states to continue deepening trade integration, and thus with Multilateral gridlock, Plurilateral entities constitute the most realistic vehicle to ensure overall trade progress.

However, the dangers associated with external Plurilateral PTAs that might damage the Multilateralist status quo, consists of differentiated integration and governance fragmentation, quantified by contemporary geopolitical tensions. The perils associated with fragmentation can be diminished if the PTAs function fully in conformity with WTO rules and regulations, thereby not altering the status quo, like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in recent times. As PTAs stand for deeper integration, in order to ensure a stable and optimistic future of global governance, it is imperative to present opportunities that Multilateralise Plurilateral innovations.⁵³ Amitabh Mattoo and Amrita Narlikar promulgated the necessity for re-assurance and policies that demonstrate a renewed teleological commitment to the *raison d'être* of Multilateralism in a post-Pandemic world order, and even though a retreating USA with Autarkic disposition during the Trump administration added damage to the Multilateral order, it is imperative to remain committed to the strengthening of global supply chains, ensuring global stability, peace and prosperity.⁵⁴

Further, there is the growing necessity for strategic decoupling in the form of diplomatic cooperation among like-minded nation-states to

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vitalise international security.⁵⁵ This will entail closer collaboration and bonhomie with some at the expense of strategically distancing from others, involving deep integration among nation-states that share first-order values and standards like pluralism, democracy and liberalism. This is evident in the recent growing importance of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as a deterrent to Chinese belligerence in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, in a period where issue-based partnerships and PTAs are emboldening the increased popularity of Plurilateralism, the vacuum of Multilateral impasse needs to be compensated with reforms, dynamism, structural Perestroika and resuscitation of its archaic institutional design, incorporating Plurilateral orientation and flexible approaches while not radically subverting international law and multilateral status quo. It can be said that Plurilateralism acts as an intermediate stage to more broad-based global framework, and a reformed Multilateral order with a mixture of Plurilateral elements is the way forward.⁵⁶

Conclusion:

In an increasingly fluid world order it is imperative for the international community to transcend the binary vision in global governance and establish a halfway-house between the empirically demonstrated beneficial elements of Multilateralism and dynamic Plurilateralism. Although the outmoded unreformed nature of the West-led Multilateral system has been inefficient in responding to the protean geopolitical realities of the world (while being a mere talking shop for the developed nations of the Global North in the name of upholding a so-called “rules-based order”) yet aspects like its collaborative blueprint and strict conformity with international law must not be ignored. Multilateral institutions have bolstered global interdependence and propelled international trade over the years, even though their recent failures have prompted a call for re-calibration and resuscitation of a floundering inertia-driven arrangement. Thus, it is highly necessary for the Multilateral system to restructure its archaic institutional design, expand its scope to become more accommodative, inclusive, and pluralistic by incorporating elements of Plurilateral arrangements without diluting the essence of democratic governance for the greater good of the international community.

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